



Misreading the Map

A Map of Misreading by Harold Bloom

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MISREADING THE MAP

A Map of Misreading
by Harold Bloom (Oxford University Press, 1975. 206 pages. \$8.95)

With *A Map of Misreading* Harold Bloom continues the presentation of what he called in *The Anxiety of Influence* antithetical criticism. *The Anxiety of Influence* was mainly theoretical criticism; *A Map of Misreading* is mainly practical. What emerges from the two books is a criticism that is antithetical in a double sense. With respect to poetry Bloom examines the psychological/rhetorical strategies of counterinfluence at work in a poetic tradition grown so rich that the young poet aspiring to greatness seems to have no imaginative space left in which to be original. With respect to literary criticism Bloom applies his own strategies of counterinfluence to American New Criticism on the one hand and to European (mainly French) theoretical criticism on the other. The dedicatees of the two books establish the critical poles between which antithetical criticism takes up its position: the earlier book is dedicated to the American formalist critic W. K. Wimsatt, the later to the European theoretical critic Paul de Man.

Bloom's stance replies to a critical dilemma: he feels that

American formalist criticism has long since done all that it is ever going to do, and that whatever European theoretical criticism might do, it simply isn't ours. In Bloom's reading of American poetry the spirit that broods over the process of influence is that of Emerson's "The American Scholar" with its call for a native counterinfluence to the dominant influence of Europe; it is this same spirit that is at work in antithetical criticism and its pitting of the practical concerns of American formalism against the theoretical obsessions of French antiformalism. Antithetical criticism, as the "higher structure" into which these modes are incorporated, is sure to bark shins in both camps. Thus *A Map of Misreading* presents a practical criticism that, in its intertextuality, its continual oscillation between works and writers, ignores just those formal boundaries that the new critic requires for the practical explication of a work; while on the other hand it presents a theoretical criticism that, in its continuing emphasis of the practical work of teaching poetic texts and a poetic tradition *to other people* in a classroom, calls into question the narcissistic ego-dancing of so many theoretical works. Bloom, then, seeks to avoid two extremes: the formalist encapsulation of the individual work (or author) like

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a model ship in a bottle, and the dreaded theoretical "French kiss" in which both the work and the author vanish from sight as the critic bends over to kiss his own backside in a mirror.

The scenario that Bloom proposes for understanding the process of influence and that he develops goes like this: at one point in our tradition poets began to lose their belief in God and started that long process of substituting a human absolute for a divine absolute, the individual self for the deity. Before that change the repetition of received models was experienced as a source of strength because the ultimate origin of the models was assumed to be divine; after that change it was experienced as a form of debilitating weakness because, when the self became the absolute, the primary values became precisely the individuality, uniqueness, and originality of each self. Bloom takes Milton's *Paradise Lost* as the historical starting point for his reading of this process, and he sees Milton's Satan, in his attempt to displace God, as the paradigm of the strong post-enlightenment poet who strives to displace his ancestors. The ultimate form of this act of displacement Bloom calls "transumption," an attempt to reverse the temporal priority of the poetic precursor so that one's poetic ancestors become, as it were, one's descendants—

the poetic equivalent of the fantasy of the reversal of generations in which the child believes that when his father grows older and he grows up he will become his father's father. What Homer, Virgil, and the Bible were to Milton, Milton was to the romantic poets, and the romantics are to us—the great precursors whose creative power seems godlike, the loved and hated fathers whose poetic strength is at once an ideal and a threat.

In Bloom's Oedipal version of poetic influence, the young poet (son) finds in the precursor's work the conjunction of the older poet (father) with the Imaginative Power, the Muse (mother). Since it is from the influence of the precursor's work that the young poet learns how to be a poet, i.e., takes his poetic generation, the conjunction of the older poet and the muse in the precursor's poem is, for the younger poet, the fantasized "primal scene" of instruction. But if the young poet aspires to the greatness of the precursor, he must achieve his own personal strength *against* the influence of the older poet. Bloom's six revisionary ratios—the notorious apotropaic litany of clinamen, tessera, kenosis, daemonization, askesis, and apophrades—are strategies of counterinfluence or reverse influence whereby the younger poet absorbs the achievement

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of the precursor and then uses that achievement against the precursor. Since Bloom believes that all reading is misreading and all writing rewriting, this process of counterinfluence involves a misinterpretation of the precursor's work so radical that it allows the younger poet to believe in his own originality as he rewrites the precursor. Thus the younger poet's imaginative fantasy of originality is simply an energizing illusion that allows him to void his own sense of belatedness in a tradition. The embodiment of that belated fantasy of originality is the poem itself.

Bloom's revisionary ratios are rhetorical tropes, modes of simultaneously availing oneself of and speaking against the force of a previous statement (the precursor's poem). Certainly one of Bloom's boldest vatic assertions is the equivalence that he draws between rhetorical tropes and psychological defense mechanisms. He claims that for at least the last three centuries tropes and defense mechanisms are interchangeable in an absolutely fixed pattern: rhetorical irony is always a reaction-formation; synecdoche a reversal into the opposite or a turning against the self; metonymy an undoing, or an isolating, or a regression; hyperbole is repression; metaphor is sublimation; and metalepsis (transumption) is introjection

or projection. Further he thinks that overdetermined fixed areas of imagery are *always* the phenomenal mask of these troping defenses or defending tropes. In calling his book *A Map of Misreading* Bloom intends a dual "geographic" reference: first, to the book as a topological survey of a psychic domain; and, second, to the fact that the scenario of counterinfluence in postenlightenment crisis poems (the only poems in which Bloom is interested) is invariably presented as an interplay of the impoverishment and enrichment of a symbolic landscape—impoverishment, as the precursor's influence is voided and his spirit (like the vanishing God) recedes over the horizon (though of course the horizon is internal; the precursor is being absorbed into the younger poet); and enrichment, as the young poet's own self expands to fill the void. Transumption, then, as an imaginative reversal of time in which one's poetic ancestor becomes one's descendant, involves a reciprocal introjection and projection.

The roots of Bloom's antithetical criticism are to be found not in Aristotle but in Moses Cordovero and Isaac Luria, not in formalism but in gnosticism. Bloom has, of course, long insisted that there is no such thing as form in poetry, and in *A Map of Misreading* he has achieved something like a goal,

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for now there are no poems, but only interpoems. Texts don't have meanings, because *there are no texts*. There are only apotropaic litanies, strange keenings that ward off other keenings. The gnosticism implicit in *The Anxiety of Influence* is explicit in *A Map of Misreading* as a cabalistic critical framework. The gnostic methodology is a necessary consequence of Bloom's scenario of the process of influence, for what the young poet finds in the precursor is a man whose direct confrontation with the Imaginative Power is, like Moses' confrontation with God, manifested in a text that has for the young poet the force of a written orthodoxy. But, like the gnostic who seeks a direct vision of the Word beyond the words, the young poet attempts to transcend the mediation of the precursor's work in order to achieve his own personal confrontation with that Power. The strategies for such a direct vision are, Bloom contends, always gnostic.

One could object to Bloom's critical obsession with "strong" and "weak" poetry that it derives from, and is restricted to, the analysis of one kind of poem—the postenlightenment crisis-of-vision poem. Bloom would, I think, admit the justice of the objection but point out that these categories should not be confused with major and minor poetry. Bloom's "weak poetry"

is poetry that aspires to the Satanic self-exaltation of strong poetry and fails, while minor poetry never addresses itself to the question of struggling with the great precursors for a spot on Parnassus. In minor poetry Bloom is interested not at all.

The ultimate problem that must be confronted in any review of a book by Harold Bloom is, of course, Bloom himself. Is Harold Bloom outrageous? Nine out of ten lost souls like dead leaves driven by the great winds coursing through the lobbies at MLA agreed in calling Bloom outrageous or some variant thereof. Bloom himself, rudely awakened at 2 A.M. and asked to give a minute account of his work, murmured, "Outrageous." Faced with such evidence, I think we must conclude not only that Bloom is outrageous but that his outrageousness is both a predilection of temperament and a conscious strategy. Certainly *The Anxiety of Influence* and *A Map of Misreading* are intended to outrage poets, for Bloom feels that with the present collapse of literary tradition anyone with psychological problems and the price of a Big Chief tablet and a crayola can start writing "poetry" and be taken seriously, and it is against these swarms of "poets" that antithetical criticism is directed as a pesticide. Bloom sees the current pragmatic

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function of teaching a literary tradition as "valuable precisely because it partly blocks, because it stifles the weak, because it represses even the strong. To study literary tradition today is to achieve a dangerous but enabling act of mind that works against all ease in fresh 'creation.'" To stifle the weak and challenge the potentially strong by making them confront how desperate is the attempt to write great poetry when one comes very late in a tradition—these are the goals of the vatic Emersonian/Paterian prose-poems that make up *A Map of Misreading*.

To point out that in many passages in this book Bloom is his own worst enemy is no devastating stroke, for Bloom's conscious understanding of the process of daemonization in the period since the self became the absolute is precisely that strength lies in the self's taking itself as its own worst enemy. What, then, is one to do with the outrageous Bloom? He must be boiled in his own broth. Like any strong influence he must be resisted and absorbed, absorbed and resisted. *A Map of Misreading* gives us the practical tools for misreading Bloom.

—John T. Irwin

WHO IS WHO

Sphere: The Form of a Motion
by A. R. Ammons (Norton, 1974.
80 pages. \$6.95, \$1.95 pb)

The first poem in A. R. Ammons's *Collected Poems: 1951-1971* begins with an improbable fiction—"So I said I am Ezra"—and the last poem in that volume ends with the assertion of a sure fact, that things are what they are, "the apple an apple with its own hue/or streak, the drink of water, the drink." In the course of this difficult but gracious progress from fiction to fact, the mask of the prophetic Ezra is replaced by the plain face of the prosaic Archie, who insists, at the end of "Corsons Inlet," that "tomorrow a new walk is a new walk." And now, in his first book since the *Collected Poems*, Ammons concludes again by asserting equations: "we're clear: we're ourselves: we're sailing." The title of the new book, *Sphere: The Form of a Motion*, invites the observation that Ammons, in the motion from "I am Ezra" to "we're ourselves," has come full circle.

The motion in Ammons seems to be away from the orthodoxies of criticism specializing in fictions (such as symbols, icons, ironies, ambiguities, and paradoxes) and toward the orthodoxies of poetry specializing in things, facts, and objects. But

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